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ABSTRACT

A major decision confronting the basic communication course director involves the degree of instructional freedom to grant teaching assistants in regard to lecture/presentational materials, readings, written assignments, examinations, and grading procedures. In making these decisions, certain philosophical and pragmatic implications of possible choices must be considered from the standpoint of all parties involved--undergraduate students, graduate assistants, course directors, and administrators. Careful consideration of three key issues--comparability, support structure, and close coordination--indicates that granting a high degree of autonomy to graduate teaching assistants can maximize the benefit of the instructional process. (EL)

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THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT: HOW MUCH AUTONOMY SHOULD BE GRANTED IN THE BASIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE?

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ABSTRACT

A major decision confronting the basic course director involves the degree of instructional freedom to grant the graduate teaching assistants in regard to lecture/presentational materials, readings, written assignments, examinations, and grading procedures. In making these decisions, certain philosophical and pragmatic implications of possible choices must be considered. In exploring these factors from the standpoint of all involved parties (i.e., undergraduate students, graduate assistants, course directors, and administrators), specific suggestions are made concerning the optimal degree of autonomy and mechanisms for implementing these decisions. In particular, the issues of comparability, support structure, and close coordination are cited as the basis for granting a high degree of autonomy to maximize the benefit of the instructional process for all involved parties.

THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT: HOW MUCH AUTONOMY SHOULD BE GRANTED IN THE BASIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE?

The basic interpersonal communication course director is responsible for ensuring high quality, professional teaching by the graduate students whom he/she supervises. In this capacity, the individual is likely to employ a variety of methods, such as training/orientation sessions, individual conferences, classroom observations, weekly meetings, and the presentation of classroom materials to assist the graduate assistants in their mastery of course content, teaching methods, and the professional role. A key factor underlies this entire approach to guiding and supervising the graduate assistants. Specifically, the course director must make certain decisions concerning how much autonomy the assistants should be granted in various course areas. These areas include lecture/presentation materials (i.e., what topics will be covered and at what length), simulations/exercises, quizzes and examinations, written assignments, grading procedures, and reading assignments. In making reasoned decisions, the course director must consider the philosophical and pragmatic implications of the choices he/she makes. The purposes of this paper are to identify and examine these philosophical and pragmatic implications, to apply them to the decision points listed above, and to draw some personal conclusions concerning the optimal approach to dealing with the issue of graduate assistants' autonomy.

Philosophical and Pragmatic Considerations

From an organizational standpoint, the individuals who are affected by decisions concerning graduate assistants' autonomy are their undergraduate students, themselves, the course director, and the multi-layered administration (i.e., area head, department chair, Dean of the College, etc.). As such, a consideration of philosophical and pragmatic implications of these decisions must involve an examination of the situation from all the affected participants' points of view. This section looks at the autonomy issue from each party's perspective.

For the undergraduate student, philosophical elements of the decision process are probably not very important. The pragmatic implications, though, certainly possess great significance for most interpersonal communication students. For example, students are typically concerned that their particular section of the basic interpersonal communication course is similar to the other sections in certain respects. Specifically, they desire that comparable reading assignments (in terms of quantity and difficulty) are made, that grading standards are similar (or more likely, easier than average!), that written assignments require a fairly equal investment of time and effort, and that similar topics are covered in class. Quite simply, they do not want to feel that their work load is significantly greater nor that the quality of their instructor is substantially lower than what their friends encounter in other sections of the course. Of course, comparability does not necessarily have to entail standardization. While students are concerned with comparability in key areas, it is doubtful that they either expect or desire total sameness. For instance, most students have very strong negative reactions to a common final examination. Thus, from the interpersonal communication student's perspective, quality and comparability across sections are the two major values which govern their assessment of instruction in this area.

An examination of the graduate assistant's standpoint reveals several philosophical considerations. For example, most graduate students place positive value on freedom of choice and learning. In other words, the ability to make one's own decisions regarding the course encourages the graduate student to consider the implications of his/her choices and permits him/her to engage in classroom activities which are personally deemed worthwhile (as opposed to reluctantly conducting class based on the course director's instructions). I am not trying to suggest that graduate students always resent direction or respond negatively to all imposed teaching assignments; in fact,

they often actively seek out additional structure and direction. The key point, though, is that a significant difference exists between a directive and a suggestion. Whereas the former behavior is often met with resentment, the latter action, which can be offered directly or requested by the graduate student, preserves the values of freedom of choice and learning while accomplishing the same objective (i.e., the enhancement of quality classroom teaching). In a similar fashion, graduate students often place positive value on creativity. Whereas the imposition of course materials by the basic course director impedes the operation of creative processes, granting the graduate assistant freedom of choice fosters creativity, which in turn should enhance teaching effectiveness.

Certain pragmatic considerations concerning the degree of graduate assistants' autonomy also exist. For example, the assistants' credibility in the eyes of their students is often diminished when the students are told or realize that the graduate assistant is not wholly responsible for the examinations or assignments in the course. A frequent complaint is that the utilization of common examinations fails to capture the variation across sections, may entail materials not covered in class, and reduces the students' value on activities selected by their instructor. Further, the graduate assistants' capabilities of designing their own assignments are at least implicitly called into question by the action of implementing common assignments. Another practical concern involves the graduate assistant's response to his/her degree of autonomy. In my limited experience as course director, I have found that the following two complementary concerns are voiced by most graduate assistants: a desire for sufficient structure, such that the course director serves as a vital resource and provides a necessary support system, coupled with a desire for formulating and enacting one's own decisions regarding course content and method. I believe that, provided graduate assistants perceive

the existence of a strong support system, their satisfaction level is enhanced by offering them a considerable degree of instructional autonomy. Also, I think that the quality of the graduate assistants' teaching is likely to be greater under these conditions.

From the course director's perspective, similar philosophical and pragmatic implications regarding graduate assistants' instructional freedom must be considered. A major concern, in my opinion, is the extent to which assistants benefit from their teaching experience. For many graduate instructors, this teaching experience is not merely a way to afford graduate study; rather, it is a direct form of career preparation. For other instructors, who do not desire an academic career, the teaching experience should still allow for personal and professional development. In my opinion, a teaching experience which permits considerable freedom in deciding how to cover and test course material accomplishes this objective better than a strictly regimented approach. On the negative side, greater autonomy places increased demands on the graduate assistants' already busy schedules. The additional time demand, though, is not too great, and the benefits of this investment provide a strong justification for encouraging this autonomy. As Yingling (Training the First-Time Teaching Assistant: An Adaptation of the Friedrich/Powll Program, Midwest Basic Course Directors' Conference, 1984) notes, "since research suggests that there is no one correct way to teach, GTAs must have the opportunity to experiment with alternative instructional strategies so that they may discover those that work best for them and thus develop their own individual style of teaching..." (p. 3).

While instructor benefit is a key goal, the course director must be concerned ultimately with the educational experience of the hundreds of undergraduate students who are directly affected by the quality of graduate

student instruction. I believe that, under most circumstances, the quality of graduate assistant teaching is enhanced, rather than degraded, by permitting the instructors to make and implement their own decisions regarding course content and method. I take this position for several reasons. First, I believe that two objectives exist in the basic interpersonal course: all areas must be covered in a satisfactory manner and, hopefully, some areas will be dealt with in a superior fashion. Here, it is necessary to acknowledge that graduate assistants bring different capabilities and interests to the teaching experience. As a result, the graduate assistants should be encouraged to devote more time to areas in which they possess more expertise. In this manner, they are more likely to learn more about these interpersonal areas than they would were all course content imposed upon them. Also, the graduate assistants can make the course director aware of relevant materials with which he/she was not previously familiar. As a result, this process can benefit future course direction. Further, the content taught in each section of the basic course will thus differ to some degree. Besides the previously discussed benefits of allowing graduate assistants to design their own examinations and written assignments, I think that undergraduate students greatly prefer assignments which are tailored to their specific section rather than imposed (like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole) on them by the course director. For these reasons, course directors should usually view graduate assistant autonomy in a favorable light.

The last levels of the university hierarchy which must be considered involve the administration, including departmental, College, and University representatives. While these individuals are furthest removed from the actual teaching process, their perspective carries considerable weight in the decision making process. From an administrative standpoint, certain concerns must be be addressed. Their foremost concern, in my estimation, is that undergraduate

students receive quality education and are satisfied with their instructional experience. This satisfaction is likely to hinge on several previously discussed factors, including comparability across sections and fairness in graded assignments. Further, they desire professionalism from the graduate assistants and hope that the teaching experience benefits the instructors. As long as these conditions are met, I doubt that most administrators are too concerned with the specific methodology by which they are accomplished. As such, it is worthwhile to consider what instructional methods based upon autonomy might entail.

Instructional Methods Which Promote Autonomy

As noted earlier, the major decision points regarding instructional autonomy in the basic interpersonal communication course involve lecture materials, examinations, written assignments, simulations/exercises, grading procedures, and reading assignments. In promoting instructional freedom in these areas, I believe that the course director's primary function or responsibility is to promote reasoned choices. Specifically, he/she should enhance awareness of instructional options in each content area by identifying and explaining activities and materials, which, from his/her experience, can be fruitfully utilized in the interpersonal course. This approach serves a key learning function for the graduate assistants and allows them to make choices which are consistent with their instructional values, levels of expertise, and comfort levels. Further, the course director should draw upon the assistants' prior teaching experiences to generate additional instructional options. For example, in weekly meetings, he/she can request that the graduate assistants discuss other materials or activities which they are familiar with and files of all such instructional contents can be maintained. Overall, this approach should satisfy the graduate assistants' needs for structure while

while preserving the value of instructional freedom.

The importance of comparability across sections and instructors has been emphasized earlier in this paper. In making specific suggestions concerning course materials, this objective must be satisfactorily accomplished. Again, comparability need not involve sameness. Instead, instructional autonomy should permit graduate assistants to teach their courses in different, yet comparable ways. Here, the course director should employ parameters to ensure that all teaching assistants are in the same ballpark, if not exactly behind home plate. For example, he/she can require that all graduate assistants teach units in specified areas, thus providing a core curriculum. Of course, the graduate assistants should be free to decide how much time to devote to each instructional unit and the lecture materials and simulations/exercises they will employ within each area. In this regard, I also try to reserve about one week in which each teaching assistant can cover related areas not included in the core curriculum. These areas encompass family communication, interviewing, intercultural communication, organizational communication, and the like. The graduate students are encouraged to select areas in which they are interested and possess some expertise.

Another specific area of concern involves examinations. Here, parameters are also necessary to ensure comparability across sections. In this regard, I believe that each section should have the same number of tests (typically two in-class exams and a final), but that the exams should be designed by each graduate assistant for his/her own sections. In this manner, the exams will reflect the individualized nature of the instruction provided in each section of the course. This goodness-of-fit is highly valued by undergraduate students and the graduate assistants. Certain safeguards, however, should be built into the system to ensure comparability, in terms of coverage, difficulty, and worthiness as an educational experience. First, the utilization of common

reading assignments provides a similar point of departure for all graduate assistants. They are free to bring in limited additional reading materials, but they must assign all of the common readings. Second, in designing the exams, the process should be structured to serve as a learning experience for the graduate assistants and to provide undergraduates with a fair, challenging test of their knowledge of interpersonal communication. As a result, the graduate assistants must draft their exam (they are able to select their own format-I point out the implications of the various testing alternatives in an early weekly meeting) and schedule a meeting with me at least three days prior to the examination date. During this conference, we discuss the exam, in terms of its balance across content areas, format, difficulty level, and length. We arrive together at a final version of the exam which we both believe to be acceptable in meeting our instructional criteria.

Another relevant area entails written assignments, including minor and major papers. Obviously, the qualitative demands placed on students, as well as the graduate assistants in the form of grading demands, should be comparable across sections. Further, the degree to which the assignments require similar analytical and integrative skills must be considered. In this regard, the course director can specify the amount of writing required of students in the basic interpersonal course while preserving freedom of choice concerning the specific nature of the assignments. My approach involves two actions regarding the graduate assistants. First, I provide them with sample minor (e.g., reaction papers) and major (e.g., extensive case study analysis, communication journal, research paper) assignments. They can make choices regarding the type of assignments utilized and they are encouraged to use these specific assignments. If a graduate assistant wants to assign something else, he/she can do so with reasonable justification. All assignments are

submitted to me for examination, providing a check on the process. In this manner, autonomy and comparability are promoted.

Underlying the previous several sections is the grading system employed by the graduate assistants. Specifically, factors such as how much each assignment should count and what grading standards should be applied must be considered. The course director must play a key role to ensure that comparability and fairness are associated with the grading process. For example, I provide parameters regarding how much each assignment must count. Instead of specifying a particular value, I identify an acceptable range of percentages. For instance, the two in-class exams must be worth 30-40 percent of the total course grade. This requirement ensures sufficient comparability while also allowing the graduate assistants to participate, based upon their value, in the decision making process. Further, the graduate assistants must submit a tentative grading plan to me before the semester begins. After examining the grading plan (and course syllabus), I meet individually with each graduate assistant to discuss their plan. If I believe deficiencies exist, we discuss the situation and try to resolve it to our mutual satisfaction. Also, the graduate students are given information concerning grading standards, including what their overall grade distribution should look like and how to differentiate among students' performance. In terms of grading distributions, they are told that a class average of 2.5-2.7 should ensue, unless they believe some deviation, in either direction, is warranted. The graduate assistants are told that each class should be treated as unique and that, in the absence of random assignment to sections, some differences may exist. If they feel this situation exists, they must provide support for their position during a cumpulsory mid-semester conference concerning course grades. Also, we devote some time to discussing grading criteria and strategies for making the necessary evaluative discriminations

among students.

Summary

I have taken the position that the educational process in the basic interpersonal communication course is enhanced by granting the graduate assistants considerable instructional freedom. Three key issues comprise the heart of my argument. First, comparability is distinct from sameness and should be an established goal in the multi-section interpersonal course. In this regard, I believe that autonomy, which is not compatible with sameness, is compatible with comparability. The second major point is that in order to ensure that they overriding goal of comparability, which maximizes instructional effectiveness, is met, an adequate amount of structure and an appropriate support system must exist for the graduate assistants. I believe that the course director must establish basic parameters to manage the teaching variance and must serve as a resource person in identifying viable options involving lecture and reading materials, simulations/exercises, examinations, writing assignments, and grading procedures for the teaching assistants. Finally, this approach requires close coordination with the graduate assistants before and during the semester they teach the interpersonal course. The orientation program, individual conferences, and weekly meetings represent a significant investment of time and energy. The payoff, though, certainly justifies this approach. I believe that instructional autonomy, far from being a laissez-faire form of course direction, is actually an involved, non-directive method which provides the greatest benefit, under most circumstances, for the undergraduate students, the graduate assistants, and the director of the basic interpersonal communication course.